

In wake of scandal, states consider requiring that clergy report abuse

Child advocates seek tougher regulations after alleged cover-ups

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NEW YORK — The child-molestation scandal that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church has led to a push in some states for laws adding the clergy to the list of professionals such as doctors and teachers who are required to report abuse.

Over the years, many states, wary of invading the privacy that protects confessions and spiritual counseling, have placed no legal obligation on the clergy to report suspicions of child abuse.

But child advocates say the laws need to be strengthened following accusations that some dioceses covered up sex charges, sometimes transferring pedophile priests from parish to parish.

"Anyone who deals with children — whether it's a coach, the band instructor, the priest or the summer camp counselor — anyone who is in a position of trust needs to be responsible," said Chris Monaco, director of the child abuse hot line for Childhelp USA, an advocacy group.

Massachusetts, where the Boston Archdiocese is at the very center of the scandal, is considering legislation to require clergy to report abuse. So are New York and Wisconsin. New Hampshire added such a provision last year.

Kentucky law requires that anyone

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who knows or has reasonable cause to believe a child is neglected or abused must immediately report it to their local Department for Social Services office, law enforcement agency or a reporting hotline: (800) 752-6200.

The only exemptions are when the abuse is learned about in a priest-penitent or lawyer-client conversation, but priests and lawyers who learn about abuse in any other context must report it. Failing to report is a misdemeanor.

Under Indiana law, "an individual who has reason to believe that a child is a victim of child abuse or neglect" is required to immediately report the suspicion to police or the local child-protection agency.

An individual who fails to report suspected abuse can be charged with a Class B misdemeanor, punishable by up to 180 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine.

Hoosiers who suspect abuse can call the police or Indiana Child Protec-

tive Services at (800) 800-5556.

Bishop Wilton Gregory, head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the group supports toughening the reporting laws as long as the privilege of confession and other private conversations with worshippers are protected.

"If clergy know that they must, outside of sacramental privilege and those seeking pastoral guidance, report incidents of molestation of children, they will feel more comfortable in sharing that kind of information, and they will realize the church is taking this seriously," he said.

Twelve states specifically require clergy to report suspected abuse, according to the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, a federal agency. Several of those states exempt information learned during confession or spiritual counseling.

An additional 16 states have laws saying in broad terms that anyone with knowledge of abuse should report it.

The majority of child abuse reports are filed by those required under law to do so. In Connecticut, for example, 62 percent of the 28,304 child abuse reports received by the Department of Children and Families in 2001 came from people obligated to report such allegations.

The penalty under the various mandatory-reporting laws is usually a fine, and prosecutors rarely go after those who fail to report abuse.

Staff writer Lesley Stedman contributed to this story.